

WHAT MATTERS?

Opportunities

Sherrae loves to sing and build connections with people around music. Each week, she plays piano in the lobby of Kennedy Krieger Institute, where passersby pause to sing with her or dance. If someone has a favorite song, Sherrae will play it when she spots them entering the building, always remembering to connect the right song to the right person.

Her mother, Vanessa, says, “To see her singing happily today, you’d never know what behavior challenges she has had.”

Born with an intellectual disability and autism, Sherrae struggles with verbal communication, but her behaviors can speak louder than words. Now 40 years old, she has experienced some day and residential programs in the past that did not work for her. During those years, her aggressive and self-injurious behaviors were troubling. Vanessa notes that her daughter stopped learning altogether and “spent her days just sitting in a group at the center doing nothing.” That changed three years ago when she found a new day program with more intensive supports that made all the difference.

Airyanna has known Sherrae for the past five years, working first as a support person in her Baltimore County supported living residence, and, later on, at her day program. She was soon promoted but still sees Sherrae daily.

“I see such a positive change in Sherrae,” says Airyanna. “She’s speaking more, gaining some communication skills to advocate for herself. She’s a much happier person.”

Vanessa points out that Sherrae is growing and learning, developing new abilities: “When she comes home on weekends, I notice her trying to clean up in the kitchen and help with the laundry.”



Sherrae is looking at an album in the Jazz section of a music store.

The difference, Airyanna and Vanessa agree, has been more educated and dedicated support staff who have higher expectations for Sherrae. **They have enabled more effective communication with Sherrae, creating real opportunities for her to engage with people in ways she enjoys and allowing her to build her day around her own interests and abilities.**

Besides playing piano, Sherrae spends time practicing math, reading, and communication skills within a small group. And every afternoon she’s out in the community, often at the YMCA, where she likes using the treadmill and the pool and engaging more people with song. Also, she loves to shop for CDs at the Goodwill, or peruse and listen to new music at a local record store. On weekends, she enjoys going to church with her mother, and out to concerts with her sister. Fewer behaviors means more access to the community and more experiences that make her happy.

When asked what she loves most about her day, Sherrae says, “music.” She is excited that she will be singing the song “Old Friend” at Airyanna’s wedding in the fall.

What matters? That our days be spent with purpose. Services are changing to help people with disabilities lead the lives they want. Ensuring they have opportunities to work and spend their days in other meaningful ways, alongside people without disabilities, is one of the ways change is happening. Learn more at: www.md-council.org